

Preference for solitary play



Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether children exhibited a preference for solitary play, same gendered play, or opposite gendered play. The hypothesis was that both males and females would spend more time in gender-segregated play than engaging with opposite-gendered peers or in non-interactive play. Play is a vital contributor to the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children (Chea, Nelson, & Ruben, 2001). One important component of childhood play is early peer interactions. The choices a child makes with regards to peer selection contribute to their development by determining the quality of their early social interactions. A number of factors must be taken into consideration when evaluating children's social situations. Children can either play alone or with one or more peers. Solitary play can take a variety of forms, each carrying a different implication for the child's social experience. Social play can involve interactions with same gendered peers or with opposite-gendered peers. Each of these components contributes to the unique social experience each child encounters.

Recent work has suggested that solitary play is not always an indicator of poor social skills. Motivations for solitary play vary and could include self-reflection or regulation, task-oriented motivations, personality characteristics, or an inability to engage with peers. Work by Moore, Everston, and Brophy (1974) has found that the majority of time children spend in solitary play is engaging in goal directed activities. These activities are beneficial for development. The researchers suggest that rather than being an immature and developmentally harmful method of play, this type of

solitary play represents independence and task orientated behaviour that should be seen as indicating maturity. It has been suggested that the category of interaction that Parten (1932) referred to as parallel interaction is a more immature form of play than solitary play rather than an intermediate step towards cooperative play (Johnson, Ershler, & Bell, 1980). This type of interaction is more frequently exhibited in younger children. Research suggests that in many situations it acts as a bridge to cooperative group play, and is often only engaged in for a very short period of time (Smith, 1978). The parallel interaction initiates communication with the child and leads to cooperative play. If the attempt to open up an interaction fails, the child may resort to parallel play again. Extensive time spent in parallel play may indicate poor social skills (Pellegrinin & Bjorklund, 1998).

As children develop, they generally spend more time in cooperative play with their peers. Research by Smith found that solitary play decreased throughout the preschool period. Another study by Rubin, Watson, and Jambor (1978) found that preschool children engaged in significantly more solitary play and less group play than children at the kindergarten level. As a child spends more time in cooperative play, peer selection becomes an important component of their social experience. The decisions a child makes regarding those they play with contribute to their development by determining the quality and characteristics of their social interactions.

Participants

The participants in the study were 10 students from Dr. Mary J. Wright University Laboratory School. The 10 participants consisted of 5 males and 5 females. The students were from the Five-Afternoon Kindergarten class and

all participants were four years old. All of the participants were Caucasian and from the middle to upper socio-economic class. During all four of the one hour observations there were approximately fourteen children including the participants and approximately six adults were present. There were child-initiated activities which included playing with Lego or blocks, drawing and colouring, and playing with various toys. There were also teacher-guided activities that included book reading, show and tell, and arts and crafts.

Observational Procedure

The participants were observed using a play partner index, which catalogued the different play partners that the children engaged with. This index had six different categories, which were: same gender play, opposite gender play, male parallel play, female parallel play, goal oriented play, and non-goal oriented play. The participants were timed in 30-second intervals using the stopwatch program on a cell phone. All of the participants were monitored from an observation room, which contained headphones, chairs, a writing table and a one-way mirror used to observe the children without disturbing their play. The students were observed in the Mary Wright Classroom during the child-initiated and teacher guided activities. Each child was observed one child at a time for 20 intervals of 30 seconds, and recorded the category of play that the child was engaging in. For example if a student was near another female student but not directly interacting with her, it would be recorded as female parallel play.

Results

The type of social play that each target student engaged in was recorded in 20, 30-second intervals for 10 minutes. The total numbers of intervals were

added up for each participant and the participant was labeled by the condition that they spend the most time in. In the single case of an equal number of intervals between two categories, each category was assigned 0.5.

There were no significant differences that were reported between the play categories for males or female. Both genders spent the majority of their time engaging in solitary play. There was only one child who demonstrated any sort of preference for opposite gendered play, and even in that case, only 50% of the participant's total interactions within the ten-minute period were within this category. These results can clearly be seen in Figure 1 on the table's page at the end of the paper. There are many possible reasons for the failure to demonstrate significant results, such as sampling issues, environmental factors, and the transitory characteristic of the age range observed.

Discussion

The hypothesis was that that both males and females would spend more time in playing with children of their own gender than interacting with opposite-gendered peers or in non-interactive play. The results failed to support the hypothesis. No significant relationship was found between the categories for males or females. Research by Smith (1978) has demonstrated that solitary play decreases throughout the preschool period, as children begin to engage more with their peers. The children were in their later years of preschool and they failed to show this preference for social interaction. It is possible that the children in the current study have not yet

made this transition. The age range considered represents the transitory stage, and this may contribute to the lack of significance in the results.

Furthermore, research by Rubin, Watson, and Jambor (1978) considered preschool aged children compared to kindergarten children, and found that kindergarten aged children spent much more time in group play than the preschoolers. The children in the current study were on the older end of the age bracket for preschool but had not yet reached kindergarten. These children may have been too young to begin to demonstrate the preference for cooperative play that was exhibited in these studies.

This research is of significant value to schools, daycare, parents, or anybody interacting with children on a regular basis. Being aware of the dominant social patterns for each age group can allow caregivers to identify children who may be diverging from the norm. If children fail to engage in positive interactions with their peers or tend to engage in long periods of parallel play, they may be developing poor social skills. Caregivers who can identify these children can then assist them in working towards positive relationships with their peers. Knowing the beneficial forms of solitary play can allow caregivers to provide children with stimulating activities that can assist them in their development, and monitor children for extensive periods of time spent in non goal-directed behaviour. Each child has independent needs when it comes to social behaviours. Being aware of the trends and risks can allow caregivers to meet the unique needs of each child.

There are many extensions that can be made to provide further insight into social patterns in children. For example, the family situation and siblings in

particular may influence social preferences exhibited in children. Some children may enjoy playing by themselves because they come from a larger family of many siblings and desire time alone. The opposite may also be true. In regards to gender preferences, children may gravitate towards peers that are the same gender of their siblings. For instance, a young girl who has three brothers and no sisters may demonstrate a preference for male play partners. The impact of being an only child could be considered, as well as the effect of a participant with mixed siblings. Patterns between siblings and peer interactions could be investigated.

As research continues to shed light on the social patterns of children, caregivers of all kinds will become more able to meet the needs of each child. Their unique traits can be appreciated and specific personal weaknesses can be attended to. As social beings, it is vital that humans be socially adjusted in order for them to reach their full potential and experience overall wellbeing. This research allows for increased insight that can ensure children are provided with the opportunity to achieve this goal and experience a positive social environment that is beneficial to their development.

References

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